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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 004430

SIPDIS

GENEVA FOR RMA

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SUBJECT: HMONG GROUP IN THAILAND'S PETCHABOON PROVINCE

Classified By: CHARGE ALEXANDER A. ARVIZU. REASONS 1.4 (B,D).

1. This is an action request. Please see para. 15.

2. (C) Summary. The 6,000 Hmong who have congregated in Thailand's northern province of Petchaboon have entered Thailand at different times and for different reasons. It is unclear how many are recent arrivals from Laos who have fled persecution, but it is most likely that the number is small and that the majority have been in Thailand for some time or entered Thailand in the hope of gaining entry to any new U.S. resettlement program for the Hmong. UNHCR is actively engaged with the Thai government on this issue and believes that the situation needs to be handled carefully because it could affect the overall Thai position on resettlement. The Secretary General of the Thai National Security Council,

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General Winai, believes that the situation in Petchaboon is a result of the pull factor from the existing U.S. resettlement program for Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok. Thai officials told UNHCR on July 7 that they would ensure that the basic needs of the Hmong are met. They would also conduct an investigation of the Hmong group to determine where they are from and why they went to Petchaboon. Pending the results of that investigation, the officials said they did not envision deportations. The Thai agreed in principle to refer cases to UNHCR that were compelling and fall under UNHCR refugee criteria. End summary.

Make-Up of the Petchaboon Group

3. (SBU) There seems to be general agreement at this point that the total number of the Hmong group in Thailand's Petchaboon Province is approximately 6,000 persons. What is less clear is who they are and when and why they came to Thailand. It seems that the group can generally be broken down into three parts: a) Persons who entered Thailand sometime after the Vietnam War and have come from other parts of Thailand to the Petchaboon site. Some may have previously lived in the old refugee camps along the Thai-Lao border and/or at Wat Tham Krabok, the site of the ongoing U.S. resettlement program; b) Persons who entered Thailand recently from Laos with the hope of getting into another U.S. resettlement program for the Hmong; and c) Persons who also entered recently from Laos but for a different reasons, that is, they are fleeing alleged persecution or fighting in Laos.

4. (SBU) It is difficult to know how many of the 6,000 fall into which of the three groups. When approximately 5,000 Hmong approached the UNHCR office in Bangkok last summer and asked for refugee status (some of these 5,000 may well now be in the Petchaboon group), UNHCR officials found that they could not determine when persons had arrived in Thailand and why they had come. UNHCR believes that many had been coached to provide accounts which would buttress refugee claims. UNHCR regional chief Hasim Utkan told Refcoord on July 6 that he believes the number of recent arrivals with strong refugee claims is likely small. Embassy Vientiane reports, based on anecdotal evidence, that some of the Hmong are recent arrivals in Thailand, albeit an uncertain number, who have fled Laotian government pressure. Embassy Vientiane also reports that some members of the Hmong community state that many in the Petchaboon group are from well-settled Hmong communities in Laos where the Hmong actually enjoy a rather high standard of living. They went to Petchaboon on rumors of another Tham Krabok program, but understand that they need to present themselves as refugees.

5. (SBU) Embassy Bangkok has also heard reports that the Hmong in the first two groups above have been encouraged to go to the Petchaboon site by their U.S. relatives. There are also reports that other persons in Thailand, Hmong or Thai, have encouraged Hmong to go to Petchaboon and have collected fees in return for promises that they would be able to ensure entry into another U.S. Hmong resettlement program.

UNHCR Position

16. (SBU) UNHCR stopped accepting Hmong refugee status applications in Bangkok last summer when it found that it could not handle the flood of 5,000 applicants. Despite this general policy, UNHCR has interviewed and referred for U.S. resettlement a very small number of Hmong over the past year who were referred by NGOs. UNHCR has formally asked the Thai government for access to the Hmong in Petchaboon, but the Thai have so far refused.

17. (SBU) In a July 6 conversation with Refcoord, UNHCR chief Utkan stated that the Petchaboon issue needed to be handled carefully because it could affect the overall Thai government approach to resettlement at a time when a major international effort was now underway to resettle Burmese refugees in the border camps to third countries. Utkan said that UNHCR had told the Thai that it was willing to consider compelling refugee cases referred by the Thai government. However, Utkan said he was leery of establishing any presence in Petchaboon at this point because it could exacerbate the pull factor. He also noted that UNHCR did not have the resources to conduct refugee interviews of 6,000 persons.

Thai Government Position

18. (U) The Thai government so far has apparently been unable to make any headway with the Lao government on the Petchaboon Hmong issue. News reports have said that the Thai have approached the Lao government, but the Lao refuse to accept any responsibility or work with the Thai.

19. (C) During a July 6 meeting with visiting EAP DAS Eric John, General Winai Phattiyakul, Secretary General of the Thai National Security Council (NSC), stated that the situation in Petchaboon was a result of the pull factor from the Tham Krabok program. He said that some persons had encouraged Hmong in Laos to go to Thailand to try to get into any new U.S. resettlement program. Winai noted that Thai provincial officials along the border had done a poor job of stopping these persons from entering Thailand. Other Hmong had come from elsewhere in Thailand. The number of the Petchaboon group had increased from 2,000 to 6,000, according to Winai, and the Thai government was worried that another Tham Krabok settlement could develop.

110. (C) Refcoord responded to Winai that it was important that UNHCR be granted some access to the group because some were likely to be real refugees, but that this needed to be done carefully to avoid exacerbating the pull factor. Winai responded that he would be willing to approve resettlement for a small number of the group but it would be difficult to determine who those persons were because many of the Hmong would likely claim they were recent arrivals fleeing persecution. In a later conversation at the Embassy, Independence Day celebration on July 6, Winai, in a rare display of anger, told Refcoord that he was frustrated with inaccurate press reporting on the Petchaboon situation. He added that Thailand was a sovereign country which had the right to control its borders. He said he would welcome a statement that the USG has no plans to establish a new large-scale program for the Hmong in Petchaboon.

111. (SBU) Press reports on July 6 said that local Thai officials in Petchaboon had told local vendors not to sell food and water to the Hmong. Thai NSC officials told Refcoord on July 6 that if the stories were true, they would tell local officials to reverse the directive. The Petchaboon Governor stated on the same day that there were no such instructions and that local officials were in fact providing some food and public health assistance. The Governor said that there is growing friction between the 6,000 Hmong and the existing Thai-Hmong community in the area. The latter apparently number about 20,000 and have lived in Petchaboon for many years. While they initially provided shelter to the Hmong who went to the Petchaboon site, they are now concerned about the trouble that is being created.

112. (SBU) UNHCR/Bangkok Chief Protection Officer Giuseppe de Vincentis told Refcoord on July 7 that he had met with Thai NSC officials that morning to discuss the Petchaboon situation. De Vincentis said he told the Thai that UNHCR would be willing to go to Petchaboon and conduct a joint assessment of the situation with the Thai. He said that it was important that humanitarian assistance is provided to the group. He also stated that UNHCR would be willing to consider compelling refugee cases referred by the Thai government.

113. (SBU) In response, Thai NSC officials stated that assistance of food, shelter, and basic health services would be provided to the Hmong. They said that UNHCR could say publicly that it had received such reassurances from the Thai government. In addition, the NSC said that the Thai government would investigate in a systematic way when the Hmong had come to Thailand and for what reason. Persons who had Thai ID cards or who had lived elsewhere in Thailand for

a long period would be encouraged to return to where they had come from. The remainder would be subject to Thai immigration law, including the possibility of deportation. However, pending the results of the investigation of the Hmong group, the officials said they did not envision deportations occurring. They discounted harsh comments regarding deportations reported in July 7 press articles attributed to General Pallop Pinmanee, Deputy Director of the Internal Security Operations Command. Finally, the NSC agreed in principle to refer Hmong cases to UNHCR identified during the investigation that are compelling and fall within UNHCR criteria. The NSC said that UNHCR could also state publicly that it received this agreement in principle from the Thai.

¶14. (C) Comment. The situation of the Hmong in Petchaboon is complex and the Thai government is struggling to manage it. Thai concerns about the Hmong have been growing steadily and it will be important to follow closely Thai government actions. The Thai appear to be trying to buy time with their investigation of the Hmong group. We have heard that they in fact had already gathered some information about the Hmong. It is likely that they will use the time to put pressure, which could include threats of arrest, on the Hmong who have Thai ID cards or are long-stayers in Thailand to return to their homes elsewhere in Thailand. We have not seen any indication so far that the Thai government is rethinking its overall approach to resettlement out of heightened concerns about pull factors, though this is an issue that bears careful watching. End comment.

¶15. (SBU) Action request: To help resolve the Petchaboon situation and demonstrate that the USG is prepared to play a helpful role, Embassy recommends that the Department issue a statement that the USG has no plans to establish a new, large-scale resettlement program for the Lao Hmong in Petchaboon. The statement could also say that the USG welcomes indications that the Thai government is providing basic assistance to the Hmong and reiterate that Hmong with claims of persecution should not be deported to Laos until those claims can be reviewed.

¶16. (U) Embassy Vientiane cleared this message.
ARVIZU